Nurturing unrest: international media and the demise of Ceauşescuism

Petrescu, Dragoş

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Nurturing Unrest
International Media and the Demise of *Ceaușescuism*

DRAGOȘ PETRESCU

Much has been written on the violent, sudden demise of Romanian communism on 22 December 1989. However, when analyzing the swift and devastating societal reaction against the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu in December 1989, one is compelled to address a rather simple question: What determined the more pro-active stances by the population against the regime? The answer is by no means simple since Romania did not have a strong tradition of public protest and overt opposition against the communist regime. No opposition "from below", on the model of the Polish Solidarity, or "from above", on the model of the Czecho-Slovak Prague Spring, emerged under the communist rule in Romania. The present study proposes a historical analysis of the way in which international media contributed in keeping alive, or in developing, a spirit of opposition towards the regime among Romania's population. It was, actually, an intricate historical process that, by the end of the 1980s, made a large majority of Romania's population listen to the information broadcast in Romanian by international radio stations and trust – not entirely, to be sure, but to a large extent – the information transmitted.

In order to investigate such a process, the present study concentrates on the international broadcasting in the languages of East-Central Europe and addresses both long- and short-term processes. Furthermore, this analysis is based on the concepts of communication, propaganda and persuasion. *Communication* refers to the transmission of factual, straight information that observes the ethics of the transmission of information. *Propaganda* is a particular form of communication, which attempts to "achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist"[1]. According to Kimball Young, propaganda can be defined as: "The more or less deliberately planned and systematic use of symbols, chiefly through suggestion and related psychological techniques, with a view to altering and controlling opinions, ideas, and values, and ultimately to changing overt actions along predetermined lines"[2]. The present study also discusses the main aspects of the battle that opposed pro-democracy propaganda to "Red" propaganda during the Cold War psychological warfare. *Persuasion* differs from propaganda in the sense that it is "transactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both persuader and persuadee". According to Victoria O'Donnell and June Kable, persuasion is: "A complex, continuing, interactive process in which a sender and a receiver are linked by symbols,

---

[1] Garth S. JOWETT, Victoria O'DONNELL, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, Calif., 1992, p. 1. For more on the issue of propaganda see Bertrand TAITHE, Tim THORNTON (eds.), *Propaganda: Political Rhetoric and Identity, 1300-2000*, Sutton Publishing, Phoenix Mill, U.K., 1999 and Jürgen WILKE (ed.), *Propaganda in the 20th Century: Contributions to its History*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, N.J., 1998.

[2] Quoted in J. A. C. BROWN, *Techniques of Persuasion: From Propaganda to Brainwashing*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, U.K., 1977, p. 19.

verbal and nonverbal, through which the persuader attempts to influence the persuadee to adopt a change in a given attitude or behavior because the persuadee has had perceptions enlarged or changed"[1].

This paper is structured on two parts. The first part discusses the Western, mainly American, efforts of international persuasion and anticommunist propaganda during the Cold War period (1945-1990) and concentrates mainly on the activity of Radio Free Europe (RFE)[2]. It also analyzes the way in which RFE covered the first major event that shook the communist bloc – the 1956 Hungarian Revolution – and how the broadcasting policy of RFE changed after that event. The second part addresses a more specific issue: the role of the international media in picturing, on the one hand, an idealized image of the "capitalistic" West and "the American way of life" and, on the other hand, in keeping alive the spirit of opposition in communist East-Central Europe. The argument put forward in this part is that, by emphasizing the great diversity of consumer goods produced by capitalism, this sort of propaganda constantly undermined the communist propagandistic efforts. This part also discusses the specific role international media played in bringing down the Ceaușescu regime through the continuous flow of information which, after the coming to power of Mikhail Gorbachev (March 1985), and especially during the "miraculous year" 1989, created a special state of mind among the population. This analysis also focuses on international media's strategy of mixing communication with propaganda and persuasion, that is, of combining the transmission of straight information with more sophisticated methods of influencing public opinion. This kind of information, broadcast mainly by RFE, had an appreciable impact on the populations living under communist regimes, and eventually contributed to the appearance of the chain reaction that led to the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe. Arguably, international media played an important role in revealing and, by means of sophisticated methods of mass communication, (over)emphasizing the structural flaws of the communist system. By doing this, it contributed to the shaping of the political cultures of resistance in communist countries, and speeded up the process that culminated with the final demise of communist regimes. The following analysis demonstrates that, due to the specificity of the Romanian communism, i.e., the nature of the regime and community political cultures, international media had a strong impact on the collapse of communism in Romania.

Furthermore, one should be aware of the fact that international media had a more limited impact on the collapse of other communist regimes in East-Central Europe. In Hungary, for instance, due to the legacy of the 1956 revolution, which shaped both the regime and community political cultures, international media had a less significant influence on the final demise of the communist regime. At the same time, international media played, for better or worse, a major role in the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Equally important, in the Hungarian case, as well as in the

---

[1] Quoted in Garth S. JOWETT, Victoria O'DONNELL, *Propaganda...* cit., pp. 1, 21. As Jowett and O'Donnell argue: "Persuasion has the effect, when it is successful, of resulting in a reaction such as, 'I never saw it that way before'. What happens is that the recipient of the persuasive interaction relates or contrasts the message to his or her existing repertoire of information", *Ibidem*, p. 21.

[2] For a perceptive analysis of the way in which the United States conducted their Cold War psychological warfare, see Michael J. SPROULE, *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion*, Cambridge, University Press Cambridge, 1997.

case of post-1968 Czechoslovakia and post-1981 Poland, international media contributed heavily in the making of the myth of "freedom fighting" nations (Hungarian, Czech and Slovakian, Polish), as opposed to the "submissive" nations (Bulgarian and Romanian). For instance, with regard to the alleged submissiveness of the Romanians under communist rule, Dennis Deletant aptly observed that "virtually nothing was known in the West of the courageous struggle in the Carpathian Mountains of small bands of partisans [in the early 1950s]"[1]. Nevertheless, after the 1989 revolutions, such myths contributed heavily to the rapid "adoption" of the former nations into the family of civilized European nations and to the protracted inclusion of the latter.

COLD WAR PROPAGANDA WARFARE: WORDS, IDEAS, AND PERCEPTIONS

Since the present analysis is also concerned with propaganda warfare, a brief survey of the structure of Western broadcasting in foreign languages during the Cold War period would contribute to a better understanding of the argument put forward by this part. According to George R. Urban, who was the director of RFE between 1983 and 1986, there were two main streams of broadcasting in the national languages of Sovietized Europe[2]. A first category was represented by the programs of radio stations such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Voice of America (VOA), Deutsche Welle (DW), Radio Vatican, etc. The main goal of these radio stations, however, was to promote the political, economic and cultural interests of their governments. In other words, they had only a limited interest in the fate of the populations under the Soviet-type regimes, since their main purpose was to pursue their own national interests. A second type comprised Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Radio Liberty (RL), which were sponsored by the United States government (both radio stations started to operate in 1951-1952 in Munich, Germany). RFE broadcast in the languages of the "other Europe" and, more importantly, its scope was to identify with the aspirations, national sentiments, and cultural traditions of the populations that fell under Soviet yoke in the aftermath of Word War II. Equally important, its role was to keep alive the hope of liberation and self-determination in those countries. As Urban aptly put it, RFE's role was to speak to "Poles *as* Poles, Czechs *as* Czechs"[3]. Radio Liberty had a more complicated mission, since it was destined to speak to the whole population of the Soviet Union. One should also keep in mind that Soviet Union was, in fact, a colonial

[1] Beginning in the late 1940s, in Romania, in the Carpathian Mountains, developed an armed resistance against the newly installed, Soviet-backed communist regime. A majority died in the fights, some were caught and executed, and only a few survived. It is also true that not all those who fought in the mountains against the communist regime did this in the name of democracy. However, this chapter of Romania's recent history seems to be totally neglected by those who advocate the distinction between the "rebellious" Central Europeans (Hungarians, Czechs, and Poles) and the "non-rebellious" Southeast Europeans (Bulgarians and Romanians). For Deletant's assertion, see his *Communist Terror in Romania: Gheorghiu-Dej and the Police State, 1948-1965*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1999, p. 225.

[2] George R. URBAN, *Radio Free Europe and the Pursuit of Democracy: My War Within the Cold War*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997, pp. ix-x.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

empire, and the radio had to address not only Russians, but also Ukrainians and other non-Russian populations, with different agendas towards self-determination and national fulfillment, so that the effectiveness of RL was seriously diminished.

There were also the critical events that shook communism in East-Central Europe to which RFE had to react and exploit, in order to undermine the communist regimes in the respective countries. Events of this kind were the Hungarian 1956 revolution, the 1968 Prague Spring or the birth of Polish Solidarity in 1981 – the first free trade union in a communist country. In this respect, one of the most controversial issues related to RFE's activity in the 1950s was its involvement in the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Some authors have argued that RFE, through its Hungarian-language broadcasts, irresponsibly misled the insurgents and made them believe that a Western intervention, on the side of the revolution, was imminent. Recent analyses revealed that it was an unfortunate interplay of misleading, inciting, passionate comments and analyses from the part of the staff of the Hungarian Section of RFE, and a great deal of wishful thinking from the part of the revolutionaries, who wanted to believe that the American administration was going to intervene militarily in order to support them. A brief survey of the RFE coverage of, and involvement in, the 1956 Hungarian revolution would help one understand better why the broadcasting policy of RFE changed in the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Equally important, such an analysis would provide more elements for investigating the way in which the Romanian desk of RFE responded to the December 1989 events in Romania.

The 1956 Hungarian revolution broke out on 23 October, sparked by a demonstration of students from different universities in Budapest. It must be mentioned that the events in Hungary had been stirred by the spectacular changes that had taken place that summer in Poland, and were extensively covered by RFE. As Urban perceptively put it:

> "Radio management would have done well to recognize without delay the implications of Gomułka's rehabilitation and popular acceptance in Poland, and the enthusiasm with which Hungary's mushrooming student circles, schoolchildren's parliaments, dissident intellectual associations, and other 'assemblies' were adopting and then beginning to apply the Polish example to Hungarian conditions, the culmination of the trend being the demand for Imre Nagy's return to power"[1].

Nevertheless, in order to understand Hungary's road to the 1956 revolution, it is important to stress the paramount importance of Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Delivered on the night of 24-25 February 1956, Khrushchev's "secret speech" opened a new chapter in the history of communist regimes[2]. In Poland

[1] George R. URBAN, *Radio Free Europe* … cit., p. 229.

[2] As Robin Alison Remington puts it, Khrushchev's secret speech "informed the party elite that the leader they had venerated was a tyrant, murderer, military incompetent with a 'mania for greatness' and no respect for Lenin's memory". Moreover, the same author argues: "Although the Soviets attacked Stalin for domestic reasons, the repercussions of that attack were international. In particular, East European Communists could hardly afford the luxury of de-Stalinization. Too much had been done in the name of Stalin. Memories were too raw. Worse, the practical result of rehabilitation would be to free a large, obviously hostile element into already festering populations". See Robin Alison REMINGTON, *The Warsaw Pact: Case Studies in Communist Conflict Resolution*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, pp. 28-29.

and Hungary it decisively contributed to the "Polish October" of 1956 and, respectively, to the 1956 Revolution. It was in Hungary where Stalinists were the first to lose influence after the death of Stalin in March 1953. In July 1953, the Hungarian Stalinist leader Mátyás Rákosi was forced to resign from the post of Prime Minister (he managed, though, to remain First Secretary of the party) and Imre Nagy became Prime Minister. Nagy would retain the post of Prime Minister until April 1955 when Rákosi, skillfully maneuvering against Nagy's reform communism and using top *apparatchiks*' fear of change, succeeded in ousting him[1].

The 1956 Polish events, which shortly preceded the Hungarian revolution, had an appreciable impact on the unfolding of events in Hungary. As Paul Lendvai argued, in Hungary "demonstrations of sympathy with Poland on 23 October 1956 turned out to be a direct prelude to revolution"[2]. In Poland, in the context of a sharp economic decline, on 28 June 1956, in the town of Poznań, the workers from the Stalin Works (Zakłady Imieniem Stalina, Poznań – ZISPO), known before 1939 as the H. Cegielski rolling stock factory, went on strike. That specific workplace in Poznań had strong working-class traditions from the interwar period and was one of the largest factories in Poland at the time, employing some 15 000 workers, which can also explain why the workers there provoked the first major social outburst in postwar Poland[3]. The protesters marched into town demanding a wage increase, more dwellings for workers, and a revision of the stiff working norms and high taxation. In the beginning, the crowd – witness accounts speak of a crowd between 20 000 and 100 000 people – marched peacefully, but in Poznań's downtown the demonstration took a violent form. The communist authorities intervened savagely: the suppression of the revolt, carried out by the army, resulted, according to official estimates, in 53 workers killed and 300 wounded. It should be also mentioned that independent Polish sources put the numbers at 74 people killed and 400 wounded[4].

A cleavage, however, existed at the level of the Polish communist ruling elite. In the conditions of the bloody suppression of the Poznań workers' revolt, the mentioned cleavage deepened and led to a change at the highest level of the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP). On 21 October 1956, Władisław Gomułka – who had been ousted from the PUWP's Central Committee in November 1949 and had spent subsequently three years in prison (1951-1954) – was (re)elected as party leader[5]. As some authors argue, Gomułka's position as a national leader and his apparent resistance to the Soviets created the prerequisites of building the legitimacy of Polish communists[6]. It is also true that workers, peasants, intellectuals and

---

[1] For more on this, see François FEJTÖ, *A History of the People's Democracies: Eastern Europe Since Stalin*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1971, pp. 23-26.

[2] See Paul LENDVAI, *Hungary: The Art of Survival*, I. B. Tauris, London, 1988, p. 47.

[3] Michael D. KENNEDY, *Professionals, Power and Solidarity in Poland: A Critical Sociology of Soviet-Type Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 26. See also R. F. LESLIE (ed.), *The History of Poland since 1863*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 349-350.

[4] Michael D. KENNEDY, *Professionals, Power and Solidarity in Poland* …cit., p. 26.

[5] Between 1949 and 1951, PUWP underwent a series of major purges which amounted to a loss of around 350 000 party members. In November 1949, Władisław Gomułka and his close associates Zenon Kliszko and Marian Spychalski were accused of "rightist and nationalist deviation", ousted from the Central Committee of the PUWP and banned from holding party office. For more on this see Jan B. DE WEYDENTHAL, *The Communists of Poland: An Historical Outline*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, Calif., 1986, pp. 63-65.

[6] As Andrzej Korbonski argues, "in October 1956, Gomułka, perceived as a victim of Stalinism and as a standard bearer of Polish independence as well as enjoying the support of the

the party members desired "security and stability", and it was believed that Gomułka would be the leader to achieve it[1].

As already mentioned, the revolution in Hungary was initiated by the student manifestation of 23 October 1956. The demonstrators met at the statue of General Józef Bem, a Polish general who was involved in the 1848 Hungarian Revolution and led the revolutionary forces in the 1849 battles against the Habsburgs[2]. However, numerous inhabitants of Budapest joined the demonstration, so that the crowd that gathered at the statue numbered tens of thousands. It was that demonstration that sparked the revolution. Departing from the statue of General Bem, a large part of the crowd headed for the Parliament. Following the Polish model – the coming back to power of Gomułka – many shouted slogans such as: "Imre Nagy into the government!". Nagy, who was outside Budapest and had returned to the city in the morning of 23 October, was asked in the evening to speak to the crowd of around 200 000 people who waited for him in the front of the building. Eventually, Nagy spoke indeed to the demonstrators, but he "addressed them briefly in cautious terms" and tried to appease the crowd. Consequently, many left frustrated[3]. Numerous protesters headed for the City Park and removed the statue of Stalin erected nearby – only a pair of boots remained on the pedestal. At the same time, radical protesters stormed the building of the public radio, and shots were fired by both those who guarded the building and from the part of the insurgents. Some authors consider that the storming of the public radio marked the beginning of the armed revolt[4]. From that moment on, the events unfolded rapidly.

Imre Nagy, who was named Prime Minister, made efforts to find a political solution to the crisis, while the revolution spread throughout the country. On 27 October, a new government composed of less compromised communists was announced, and on 1 November, Nagy informed Yurii V. Andropov, the Soviet ambassador, about Hungary's decision the step back from the Warsaw Treaty Organization. In the evening, Nagy announced on the radio that Hungary proclaimed its neutrality. Between 1 and 4 November, the pace of changes indicated a clear trend towards the establishment of a democratic political order. On 4 November 1956, the Soviet troops attacked Budapest and put an end to the Nagy's government activity. With Soviets' support János Kádár came to power and, on 7 November, his regime was officially instated.

During the 1950s, no similar events occurred in Romania. As shown below, crucial events, on which RFE had an appreciable influence, occurred much later, in December 1989. However, since few authors have addressed the Romanian reaction to the 1956 Hungarian revolution, some details are necessary. The Romanian

---

[Catholic] Church, was in an excellent position to make communism legitimate". See Andrzej KORBONSKI, "Dissent in Poland, 1956-76", in Jane Leftwich CURRY (ed.), *Dissent in Eastern Europe*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1983, p. 39.

[1] Michael D. KENNEDY, *Professionals, Power and Solidarity in Poland* … cit., p. 27.

[2] François FEJTÖ, *A History of the People's Democracies: Eastern Europe Since Stalin*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1971, p. 77. On the role played by General Bem in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 see László KONTLER, *Millennium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary*, Atlantisz Publishing House, Budapest, 1999, pp. 254-259.

[3] See Stephen D. Kertesz, "Hungary," in Stephen D. KERTESZ (ed.), *East Central Europe and the World: Developments in the Post-Stalin Era*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind., 1962, pp. 125-126.

[4] See György LITVÁN (ed.), *The Hungarian Revolution of 1956: Reform, Revolt and Repression 1953-1963*, Longman, London, 1996, p. 58.

communist elite condemned the Hungarian revolution and succeeded in convincing the Soviets of their profound loyalty – after all, the 1956 events in Poland and Hungary favored the strategy of the Romanian Stalinist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, to preserve his personal power and avoid de-Stalinization. The population, however, sympathized with the insurgents and numerous individuals expressed their solidarity with the Hungarian revolution in those days[1]. In the city of Timișoara, the manifestations of sympathy towards the Hungarian revolution were the most virulent. As one of the participants confessed, students listened avidly to foreign radio stations, including Radio Budapest, searching for news about the course of events in Hungary. Unrest developed slowly from 23 to 30 October, when a mass meeting was called. The regime, however, reacted swiftly and ruthlessly to hamper the spreading of the protest: between 30 and 31 October 1956, the army and the secret police occupied the student campus and around 3 000 students were arrested. Of those arrested 31 were put on trial and sentenced to terms varying from 2 to 8 years in prison[2]. Although the protest was savagely suppressed, the population of Timișoara kept alive the spirit of anticommunist resistance: it was in Timișoara that the 1989 Romanian revolution began.

To sum up, as far as RFE's broadcasting policy is concerned, the 1956 events in Hungary provoked significant changes. As shown above, during the days of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution many of the insurgents believed that the West would support them. Furthermore, many took literally the American propaganda. True, Western propaganda, and especially some irresponsible comments and appeals coming from RFE led many Hungarians to believe that their sacrifice was not in vain. As far as the broadcasting policy of RFE is concerned, some argued that the staff of the Hungarian Service was too right wing, which could explain the nature of comments and appeals broadcast in those days. Others stated that something was wrong at the management level of RFE. Whatever the explanation, a profound misunderstanding occurred. A young Hungarian revolutionary spoke in bitter words of the tragedy of a majority of the revolutionaries, who thought that their revolt would be supported by the West: "Words like 'freedom', 'struggle for national honor', 'roll-back', and 'liberation' have meanings…. If America wants to flood Eastern and Central Europe with these words, it must acknowledge ultimate responsibility for them. Otherwise you are inciting nations to commit suicide"[3].

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that RFE *did not* provoke the 1956 revolution. Indeed, as Urban's thorough analysis shows, the Hungarian-language programs of RFE caused profound misinterpretations *during* the 23 October–4 November 1956 events[4]. What is of prime importance for this analysis, however, is that from 1956 on, the policy of the Radio changed. As a consequence, during the next crises of world communism – Prague 1968, Gdansk 1980, East-Central Europe 1989 – no 1956-like appeals to frontal challenge were ever made. At the same time, as shown below, the strategy of RFE relied on a sophisticated combination of

---

[1] See especially the reports by the *Securitate* informers regarding the popular reactions to the 1956 Hungarian revolution in Corneliu Mihai LUNGU, Mihai RETEGAN (eds.), *1956 – Explozia: Percepții române, iugoslave și sovietice asupra evenimentelor din Polonia și Ungaria*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 1996.

[2] With regard to the 1956 events in Timișoara a precious witness account is Aurel BAGHIU, *Printre gratii*, Editura Zamolxis, Cluj-Napoca, 1995, esp. pp. 7-24.

[3] Quoted in George R. URBAN, *Radio Free Europe* … cit., p. 220.

[4] *Ibidem*, pp. 239-242.

communication and propaganda meant to nurture domestic opposition to the communist regimes in East-Central Europe. The way in which such a strategy worked in the case of Romania is addressed below.

CEAUȘESCU'S ROMANIA: FROM DISENCHANTMENT TO REVOLUTION

As already mentioned, the case of Romania is quite unique, because the international media, and especially the Romanian desk of RFE, played a major role in the collapse of the communist regime. One should explain, however, why the international media was so influential, and why the overwhelming majority of Romania's population listened to the programs of the foreign radio stations? The answer is by no means simple, since it requires a detailed analysis of the period of decline that started around 1977. Between 1981 and 1989, Romania experienced a period of deep economic crisis, cultural autarchy, ethno-national propaganda and widespread malaise. In this context, there were two major trends that converged and made an overwhelming majority of the population pay a special attention to international media.

First and foremost, it was the emergence of an idealized image of the West that made the population, primarily the younger generations, to look after Western cultural products. Because of the economic crisis and regime's policy of cultural autarky, indigenous cultural products were prevalent, from music to movies. Therefore, there is no wonder that audiences deserted and looked elsewhere for something new. However, the quest for Western cultural products led also to a habit of listening to programs in Romanian language broadcast by foreign radios. Among these, RFE programs featured prominently and contributed in many ways in nurturing the opposition to the regime among younger audiences.

Second, it was the character of the public life in the 1980s that determined a total mistrust, of a majority of country's population, towards the official press, radio, and television. People were simply exasperated by the official propaganda, which spoke unrelentingly of regime's unparalleled achievements under the wise guidance of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the "Genius of the Carpathians". The real situation was totally different, and people knew it. Therefore, they wanted to find more about recent international and domestic events and turned to foreign radio stations, of which, again, RFE was usually the first choice.

The Idealized Image of the West

An idealized, even mythical image of the prosperous West emerged among the populations living under "really existing socialism". Such an image, continuously nurtured by the international media, contributed heavily to the breakdown of communism. A famous scene from the movie *Megáll az idő* (*Time stands still*) by the Hungarian film director Péter Gothár, wonderfully epitomizes this aspect. In post-1956 communist Hungary, at a party, someone brings a bottle of Coca-Cola – one of the most desired beverages among the young generation under communism, and one of the strongest symbols of the West and the "American way of

life". After taking a glass of Coke, one of the participants effectively gets drunk, and has to be carried home by his brother and some friends[1]. This scene is, perhaps, the best illustration of how powerful the myth of the capitalistic West was among the young generations living in the Sovietized countries of East-Central Europe. Nevertheless, one should be reminded that, in the late 1980s, Hungary was better off than many of the other communist countries in East-Central Europe. To be sure, an idealized image of the West existed also in Hungary, in the late 1980s, but Kádár's "soft dictatorship" and "gulyás communism" elevated the living standard to a certain extent and reduced accordingly the level of frustration among the population. An album published by András Gerő and Iván Pető, which reconstructs the atmosphere in Hungary during the Kádár era by combining photographs and press reports, conveys a convincing overall image of that period[2].

The case of Romania is perhaps more emblematic in analyzing the way in which international media contributed in spreading a mythical image of the affluent, capitalistic West. As shown above, until the middle 1970s the regime had something to offer to Romania's population at large. Industrialization, urbanization, spread of education, acceptable sanitation, rather fair chances of upward mobility, all these led to a tacit deal between regime and society. Beginning in the early 1980s, however, the economic policy of the Ceaușescu regime plunged the country into a deep economic crisis, characterized by food rationing measures for bread, sugar, cooking oil and other basic foodstuffs. Simultaneously, in order to reduce country's external debt, the regime drastically reduced imports, which deepened further the food crisis. In the conditions of economic failure described above, the West, with its affluence and freedom, became a sort of Paradise on Earth in the minds of the ordinary Romanians. To be sure, such a representation of the West nurtured the political cultures of the resistance and, in the long term, contributed to the sudden collapse of the regime in December 1989. As a Western scholar aptly puts it:

> "It is perhaps a sad but significant fact that the biggest factor in the fall of East European communism was not the desperate striving for political freedom so much as a desire for a Western standard of living seen on Western television which East Europeans could pick up, a standard of living that communist governments could not deliver"[3].

It was this silent, long-term process of imagining the affluent West that undermined regime's efforts to control the society as a whole. (It is also true that such a widespread, distorted image of the capitalistic West aggravated the syndrome of "civilizational incompetence". People were not used to work hard, face competition and take risks, which led to difficult problems of adaptation to a functioning market economy in post-communist Romania.) Western consumer goods became, for many Romanians, a sort of cult objects. Those who received parcels from the West used to invite their relatives or friends to the "ceremony" of parcel opening to admire together the colorful labels and nice packages, and have a taste of good life. Brand names such as *Fa* and *Lux* (toilet soap), *Kent* (cigarettes), *Rifle* (Italian-made blue jeans), were synonymous with the affluent West. Western products were so desired that average Romanians developed strange habits. When they

---

[1] Péter GOTHÁR, *Megáll az idő* (*Time stands still*), 105 min., 1981.

[2] See András GERŐ, Iván PETŐ, *Unfinished Socialism: Pictures from the Kádár Era*, Central European University Press, Budapest, 1999.

[3] Ian ADAMS, *Political Ideology Today*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001, p. 284.

could procure from the black market a scented soap, say, a *Fa* soap (the German brand was particularly desired in communist Romania), they did not use it: they placed it inside the wardrobe to scent the clothes and the underwear. Furthermore, chronic shortages of consumer goods led to a politicization of consumption and to an increased attraction to Western goods. As Katherine Verdery puts it, "you could spend an entire month's salary on a pair of blue jeans, for instance, but it was worth it: wearing them signified that you could get something the system said you didn't need and shouldn't have"[1].

The idealized image of the capitalistic West and the "American way of life" also spread through informal networks of Western videocassettes. In many cases, communist officials or secret police officers brought such tapes to Romania and fuelled the networks[2]. In late *Ceaușescuism* a video player was also seen as a symbol of material affluence that one should rather conceal. For instance, a joke that circulated in Bucharest at the time reads as follows:

> "A kid was playing in the front of the block together with other kids whose parents and grandparents were sitting nearby. He saw his mom coming from work and shouted out: 'Mom, which is the most secret thing, that papa listens to the Radio Free Europe, or that we've bought ourselves a video player?'"[3].

Nevertheless, as a Romanian sociologist suggested, the informal videocassette networks did not constitute dissident networks. At the same time, they contributed decisively to the spread of a mythical image of the affluent West. Those videotapes spoke – as an advertisement for the *Kent* cigarettes reads – about a "magic moment"[4]. A "magic moment", it must be added, that could be experienced only in the capitalistic West, and certainly not under "really existing socialism".

For those who could not afford a video recorder or did not have a friend or relative to own one, radio was a cheap and convenient means of evading from the misery of late *Ceaușescuism*. The official radio and TV broadcast boring, if not totally uninteresting programs, dedicated mainly to the "most beloved Man of the Fatherland", the "Genius of the Carpathians", Comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu. One should be reminded that Romania was a special case since, during the 1980s, the national TV station broadcast only two hours in the evening, and almost the whole program was dedicated to the Ceaușescu ruling couple. For instance, on 27 Janu-

---

[1] Katherine VERDERY, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1996, p. 29. Actually, in the 1980s, a pair of blue jeans was sold on the black market for 1 400-1 500 lei. To have an idea of how much that sum meant it would be useful to mention that in 1987, this author, as a young engineer in his first year of activity, had a monthly salary of 2 160 lei.

[2] It was said that, in the late 1980s, communist Romania had the largest number of videocassette recorders (VCRs) *per capita* of all the communist countries of East-Central Europe. Although such an assertion is difficult to prove, if one looks into the advertising pages of the daily newspaper *România Liberă* of the late 1980s, one can find numerous announcements for VCRs offered for sale by individuals. One should also note that the overwhelming majority of the population could not afford to buy a VCR. At the time, on the black market the cheapest VCR was sold at an average price of 45 000 lei, which was equivalent to 20 medium monthly salaries. Considering the prohibitive prices of video players, not to speak of video recorders, collective viewing was predominant.

[3] Reproduced in *Martor: The Review of Anthropology of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant*, București, no. 7, 2002, p. 72. Hereafter quoted as *Martor*.

[4] See Bogdan VASI, "Fenomenul 'video' și mirajul American", in *Inițiativa Culturală Studențească (ICS)*, Târgu Mureș, nr. 3-4, aprilie-mai 1996, p. 14.

ary 1987, one day after Nicolae Ceaușescu's anniversary, which was celebrated on 26 January, the national TV station broadcast from 8 P.M. to 10 P.M. as follows:

"8:00 P.M.: News;
8:20 P.M.: 'We praise the country's leader!' (Poetry);
8:40 P.M.: 'Brilliant theoretician and founder of communism' (Documentary dedicated to the theoretical work of comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu);
9:00 P.M.: 'We salute the supreme commander!' (Performance realized by the army's artistic brigades);
9:50 P.M.: News;
10:00 P.M.: Closing of the program"[1].

It is therefore understandable why Romanians attempted to forget the hardships of the everyday life by shifting to the programs of foreign radio or TV stations[2]. Moreover, one should be reminded that, as compared with the former German Democratic Republic, former Czechoslovakia, Poland or Hungary, Romania does not border Western countries. Until 1989, Romania's neighbors were, from West to the East, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and the Soviet Union. Consequently, many Romanians built special TV antennas to receive programs from neighboring countries. To be sure, the areas located in western Romania, such as the Timiș and Arad counties, had the advantage of being able to receive the more liberal programs of the Hungarian and Yugoslav TV stations. This aspect should not be neglected when analyzing the relationship between the exposure to the international media and the anti-regime attitudes in that part of the country. In Bucharest, the only alternative to the Romanian official TV program was the Bulgarian television, a situation which at the time was subject of numerous jokes that also emphasized regime's failure to fully control its subjects by restricting their access to information[3].

As far as "light" musical novelties were concerned, the foreign radio stations, such as RFE, Voice of America, BBC, Deutsche Welle etc. were the most listened to. The younger generations, especially, listened avidly to the late night rock music programs of RFE – intelligently placed after the political programs, and the Voice of America. In the conditions of the structural crisis of the late 1980s, however, the way from rock to opposition towards the regime proved to be unexpectedly short. Younger generations, most prominently the 1968-1969 generation, went through a different process of political socialization – in which RFE's programs played an appreciable role – and were more inclined to protest against the regime than the gen-

[1] Reproduced in Sorin MITU et al., *Istoria românilor*, Editura Sigma, București, 1999, p. 131.

[2] To be sure, the regime was worried by the population's interest in the programs of foreign radio and TV stations. Although it was not officially confirmed, in the late 1980s circulated persistent rumors about Ceaușescu's alleged request to the managers of the Romanian consumer electronics factories (radio and TV sets) to design and produce equipment that could only receive the programs of the national Radio-Television.

[3] For instance: "*The schoolmistress*: Children, please tell me how do you apply the Party directives concerning electricity saving. Popescu! *Popescu*: My mother keeps the food on the balcony so that she does not have to use the refrigerator. *The schoolmistress*: Good! Ionescu! *Ionescu*: When I come back from school I do not go out to play. Instead, I start immediately doing my homework, so that in the evening we do not have to turn on the lights. *The schoolmistress*: Good! Bulă! *Bulă*: In the evening we watch the Bulgarian television so that we consume *their* electricity!". See Dana Maria NICULESCU-GRASSO, *Bancurile politice în țările socialismului real*, Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1999, p. 200.

eration of their parents. Such a trend did not pass unobserved by the RCP and its secret police. As documents from the *Securitate* files recently released for research show, during the 1980s a major problem of the *Securitate* was the "extraordinary audience" that RFE programs had among adolescents in Romania. The Party was aware that of the young public that listened to musical programs of RFE would be transformed into the more politicized public that would contest soon the RCP policies. Measures were taken to identify and punish the adolescents who were writing to RFE to ask for musical dedications. For instance, in a report dated 16 February 1985, the *Securitate* agents informed that three adolescents from Bucharest schools who had sent messages to the RFE musical program were identified. Their names were: Liviu Barbu (Secondary School no. 108), pseudonym Lie; Liviu Constantinescu (Industrial High School no. 27), pseudonym Lopez; and Daniela Toniu (Secondary School no. 160), pseudonym Kim. The *Securitate* had, nevertheless, a crucial problem: How could one identify and punish the hundreds of youngsters who were writing to the RFE under pseudonyms such as Lord John, Marshal Hendrix, Richard Right, Zoly the 13th, Heavy Metal 21, the Crab with Eyeglasses or the Yellow Vampire[1]?

The Triangle of Romanian Dissidence (1977-1989)

During the 1980s, for a large majority of the Romanians, the main source of information with regard to international relations and politics, East-West relations and Cold War related issues, was RFE. Since, for obvious reasons, there are no surveys on the size of RFE audience in Romania during the communist period the researcher is compelled to rely on scarce and unsystematic information. Nevertheless, it may be argued that it was before the effects of the structural crisis of the 1980s were felt that an appreciable part of the population started to listen on a regular basis to RFE's programs. In fact, the year 1977 was a turning point also in terms of Romania's population interest in RFE's programs. Episodes of protest against the regime on which the regime kept a total silence, such as the Goma dissident movement and the Jiu Valley miners' strike, made many Romanians turn to RFE programs for details and comments. It was also an unexpected event, namely, the terrible earthquake of 4 March 1977 that made RFE programs very popular in Romania. In the aftermath of the earthquake, many of those living abroad wanted news about close relatives and friends and RFE, through its non-stop programs, tried to cope with such a demand. RFE also provided information on the international efforts to help Romania and, more importantly, spoke of things that the regime wanted to avoid, such as the way in which the rescue operations were organized and carried out. This author, for instance, a schoolboy at that time, became acquainted with RFE during the nights that followed the earthquake of 4 March 1977.

During the 1980s, however, RFE voiced a sharp criticism of the Ceaușescu regime, from both foreign *and* domestic, i.e., from within the country, individuals or groups. Again, although there is little systematic information and clear data on this topic, it is generally accepted that RFE was one of the most, perhaps the most, listened to foreign radio station in Romania during the 1980s. The voices of Noel

[1] For more on this, see Mihai PELIN, *Operațiunile "Melița" și "Eterul": Istoria Europei Libere prin documente de Securitate*, Editura Albatros, București, 1999, pp. 278-280.

Bernard, Emil Georgescu, Vlad Georgescu, Monica Lovinescu, Virgil Ierunca and Emil Hurezeanu, to name only a few, entered every evening the homes of a majority of Romania's population. It is also important to mention that, after 1989, many of the former speakers, analysts and collaborators of RFE published their diaries, memoirs, or the analyses written at the time. Such works are also important because they provide consistent autobiographical information and reveal that, in the overwhelming majority of the cases, those who worked for, or collaborated with, the Romanian desk of RFE opposed communism in the name of democracy and not because of right-wing convictions[1].

The way in which the Romanian desk of RFE contributed to the final demise of communism in Romania deserves a thorough investigation. As already noted, in Romania did not develop a dissident or a Solidarity-like movement. However, isolate protests did occur, and courageous people did speak openly against the regime. For such an isolated protest to become vocal enough as to embarrass the regime, two things were obligatory. First, that the protester avoid imprisonment; and second, that his or her message spread among their fellow citizens and a way to achieve these goals was to inform the Romanian Service of RFE about their initiatives. This way, international human rights organizations could be announced in due time, and could provide support and some protection to dissidents by launching international media campaigns. At the same time, by making their voices heard through RFE, dissidents' ideas could spread among their country fellows. Therefore, it is this author's opinion that a sort of *triangle of dissidence* developed in post-1977 Romania. This can be defined as a relational nexus composed of the dissidents, the Romanian section of RFE and the silent mass of Romanians, unable or unwilling to articulate a coherent protest. Through RFE, dissidents' ideas influenced a major part of Romania's population and fuelled the growing discontent with the regime.

Some examples would be useful in order to illustrate the way in which the triangular relational nexus of Romanian dissent actually functioned. For instance, writer Paul Goma, the leader of the first Romanian movement for human rights, was imprisoned on 1 April 1977 after sending a letter of solidarity, in January 1977, to Pavel Kohout, one of the leaders of Czechoslovak *Charter 77*. The news concerning Goma's imprisonment reached the Romanian Section of RFE, which launched an international campaign for his liberation. Similarly, another prominent Romanian dissident, Dan Petrescu, made his ideas known with the help of international media. Petrescu's open criticism towards the regime – he stated clearly that it was the communist system to be blamed for Romania's disastrous situation and not solely the person of Nicolae Ceaușescu – spread among Romania's population especially through RFE[2].

It is also true that the information regarding the opponents of the regime was not always accurate. In Romania, few foreign press correspondents were dispatched and, when they came, their travels throughout the country were closely

---

[1] See, for instance, Monica LOVINESCU, *La apa Vavilonului/2: 1960–1980*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2001; Anneli Ute GABANYI, *The Ceaușescu Cult*, The Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, București, 2000; Mircea CARP, *"Vocea Americii" în România, 1969–1978*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1997; Nicolae STROESCU-STÂNIȘOARĂ, *În zodia exilului: Fragmente de jurnal*, Editura "Jurnalul Literar", București, 1994 and Noel BERNARD, *Aici e Europa Liberă*, Editura Tinerama, București, 1991.

[2] Dan PETRESCU, Liviu CANGEOPOL, *Ce-ar mai fi de spus: Convorbiri libere într-o țară ocupată*, rev. ed., Editura Nemira, București, 2000, pp. 231-243.

supervised and they were denied any access to the opponents of the regime. There were different ways in which such protests arrived to RFE in Munich. In general, information arrived in the West through foreign diplomats, employees of the international companies, recent emigrants, and foreign lecturers associated with Romanian universities. In some cases, foreign reporters, who took great risks, could meet opponents of the regime. For instance, two reporters from Gamma News Agency realized, in April 1988, an interview with Dan Petrescu. Shortly afterwards, the two were arrested, their equipment confiscated and expelled from Romania. Fortunately, a copy of the filmed interview was left behind in safe hands, in the city of Iași, where the interview was taken, and smuggled to the West one year later. Finally, the interview was broadcast by the French TV channel *France 3* on 26 January 1989, and re-transmitted by RFE on 8 February 1989[1].

The acerbic comments and analyses broadcast by RFE contributed decisively to a changing of the mindset of the population, who started to cast serious doubts towards the regime's social, economic and cultural policies, and to develop a spirit of resistance. Announced by an unforgettable tune by the Romanian composer George Enescu – the main musical theme of his Second Romanian Rhapsody in D minor, Op.11 – *Actualitatea românească* was perhaps the most popular of RFE's programs because of its open criticism and pungent satire of the Ceaușescu regime. It is also important to emphasize the courage, determination and commitment for democratic values of those who worked for the Romanian desk of RFE. In numerous cases, the Romanian desk of RFE made possible the transmission of dissident messages that were not usually allowed by the broadcasting policy of the RFE, as established in the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Some of the commentators or collaborators of RFE's Romanian desk went so far as to risk dismissal because of their overt attacks on the communist regime in Bucharest and their support for the isolated voices of the Romanian dissidence[2].

This, however, incurred great risks from the part of the staff of RFE's Romanian Service. At this point it is important to emphasize that under Gheorghiu-Dej, the *Securitate* adopted a rather passive attitude towards the activity of the RFE. Moreover, such an attitude was maintained in the first years of the Ceaușescu regime, i.e., until the early 1970s. Things, however, changed fundamentally during 1970s, when the Party ordered the *Securitate* to take pro-active and even offensive steps to combat RFE's activity[3]. One should also note that between 1981 and 1988 the Romanian desk lost three of its directors in a row: Noel Bernard (1981), Mihai Cismărescu – pen name Radu Gorun (1983), and Vlad Georgescu (1988). As Urban put it, RFE "had suffered no comparable loss in any of its other national services"[4]. These premature deaths were highly suspicious, and many observers spoke of the active involvement of Ceaușescu's secret police, the *Securitate*, although not much could be proved. According to General Ion Mihai Pacepa, perhaps the most prominent high rank officer that defected to the West during the communist years – he left Romania on 23 July 1978 and arrived in the US, via Frankfurt/Main, on 28 July 1978 – the *Securitate* had to do with those suspicious deaths. Pacepa speaks in his memoirs of a

[1] See the complete text of the interview in *ibidem*, pp. 268-279.

[2] See document no. 399, "Notă informativă", dated August 1986, in Mihai PELIN et al. (eds.), *Cartea Albă a Securității: Istorii literare și artistice, 1969-1989*, Editura Presa Românească, București, 1996, p. 352.

[3] See Mihai PELIN, foreword to IDEM, *Operațiunile "Melița" și "Eterul"*…cit., pp. 8-9.

[4] George R. URBAN, *Radio Free Europe* … cit., pp. 127-128.

radioactive device, whose code name was "Radu", utilized by the *Securitate* to irradiate regime's opponents. According to Pacepa, Ceaușescu ordered a portable version of "Radu" to be manufactured and placed in Noel Bernard's office at RFE[1].

Nevertheless, Ceaușescu's determination to silence his most vehement critics in RFE's Romanian Service was clear and dates back to 1977. A first attack against an editor of RFE's Romanian desk was carried out on 18 November 1977, in Paris. On that occasion, two mercenaries allegedly hired by the *Securitate* on Ceaușescu's orders savagely beat Monica Lovinescu, a reputed literary critic and RFE editor. (Beginning in 1967, Monica Lovinescu realized for RFE an important program, "Theses and anti-theses in Paris" which was widely listened to in Romania.) The attack on Monica Lovinescu was also linked to her active involvement in launching (spring 1977) the international campaign in favor of writer Paul Goma. Fortunately, Monica Lovinescu has left a personal account of the attack. Unfortunately, her account cannot be corroborated with the information contained in the *Securitate* files. However, the information gathered until now indicates towards an involvement of the *Securitate*[2]. A similar attack was orchestrated in July 1981, in Munich, against Emil Georgescu, one of the most caustic commentators of RFE's Romanian Service. In the case of Emil Georgescu, however, the *Securitate* files suggest that the attack was actually a Mafia-type operation incurred by some murky financial arrangements Georgescu was involved into. At the same time, there is still scarce information to be corroborated with that provided by the *Securitate* files. Therefore, at the present stage of research, in the Georgescu case is still unclear if it was indeed an operation of the *Securitate* or a revenge of Georgescu's alleged dubious business partners[3]. Both Monica Lovinescu and Emil Georgescu were seriously injured, but survived the attacks.

In their search for dissident discourses in communist Romania, RFE's commentators also influenced, consciously or not, the nature of the post-1989 transition to democracy. After 1985, the name of Ion Iliescu was often associated with the name of Mikhail Gorbachev. Persistent rumors circulated in Bucharest about Moscow's intention to replace Nicolae Ceaușescu by Ion Iliescu. In its determination to nurture opposition and dissent from within and outside the Party, RFE was equally interested in the person of Ion Iliescu. For instance, on 19 December 1987, in his program dedicated to reviewing Brucan's recently published book *Socialism at Crossroads*, Vlad Georgescu made reference to Ion Iliescu's views, in many respects similar to those of Gorbachev[4]. Such references contributed in making the name of Iliescu known to wider audiences, both in Romania and abroad, and contributed significantly to the widespread acceptance of Iliescu as the leader of the National Salvation Front in the afternoon of 22 December 1989.

---

[1] Ion Mihai PACEPA, *Red Horizons*, Heinemann, London, 1988, p. 416. Pacepa also states that Elena Ceaușescu was particularly angered by Emil Georgescu's caustic comments and wanted to silence him.

[2] For a personal account of the November 1977 attack, see Monica LOVINESCU, *La apa Vavilonului …* cit., pp. 247-252. On the scarcity of the *Securitate* files regarding the attack on Monica Lovinescu released for research until now, see Mihai PELIN, *Operațiunile "Melița" și "Eterul"…* cit., pp. 119-122.

[3] On the attack on Emil Georgescu, see George R. URBAN, *Radio Free Europe …* cit., p. 128. For the information on Emil Georgescu contained by the *Securitate* files, see Mihai PELIN, *Operațiunile "Melița" și "Eterul"…* cit., pp. 161-163 and 239-242.

[4] See Vlad GEORGESCU, Editorial no. 42, "Reading Brucan," Air date: 19 December 1987, Romanian Fond, OSA/RFE Archives, pp. 3-4.

Ion Iliescu himself has acknowledged the role RFE played in emphasizing his critical stance towards the huge waterworks projects envisaged by Ceaușescu during the 1980s[1].

The role international media – RFE in particular – played during the "miraculous year" 1989 deserves a thorough investigation. A first thing to say is that towards the end of the communist rule in Romania, listening to RFE became customary. As writer Stelian Tanase noted in his diary on Thursday, 7 September 1989: "When I arrive home, along the doors on the hallway, the buzzing sound of the short waves: people have switched definitively on Radio Free Europe"[2]. It may be argued that the case of Romania is quite unique because the Romanian desk of RFE played a role of prime importance in the collapse of the communist regime. As this author has demonstrated elsewhere, a combination of structural, nation-specific and conjunctural factors made unavoidable a bloody revolution in Romania, unique in the context of the 1989 revolutions in East-Central Europe[3]. The "movement of rage" that overthrew the Ceaușescu regime in December 1989 was fuelled by the news concerning the unfolding of events in the other communist countries. A participant to the 1989 revolution in Timișoara remembers: "For some years I was following daily the programs of RFE and Voice of America waiting for 'something to happen'. It was clear for me that the end of Ceaușescu was close"[4]. Another revolutionary from Timișoara, Ioan Savu, confesses that he was walking by the Maria Square in Timișoara beginning with 14 December waiting for the *moment*, i.e., the revolutionary moment: "I felt that we, Romanians, were also close of the crucial moment of our existence. Fortunately, in Timișoara, we are kept informed with sufficient news from the free world by the Yugoslav and Hungarian TV stations. So far, the downfall of the socialist system had started in all the countries around us"[5].

International media had a paramount influence during the period 16-22 December 1989, i.e., the period between the revolt in Timișoara and the uprising in Bucharest. The news about the Timișoara uprising reached the Western capitals from the night of 17-18 December on. Immediately, international media picked up the news and broadcast it widely. The Romanian desk of RFE, especially, re-transmitted the news, both to the international and Romanian audiences. From that moment on, the overwhelming majority of the Romanian population knew that the inhabitants of Timișoara initiated mass protests against the regime. In this respect, eyewitness accounts abound. Daniel Vighi recalls that when the revolution sparked in Timișoara, many of those who took part in the events were concerned with spreading the news to the outside world and their first thought was to announce RFE[6]. Another participant to the Timișoara revolt, Dan Ștefan Opriș, affirms that, in those crucial days of 16-22 December 1989, RFE was the only link

---

[1] Ion ILIESCU, *Revoluție și reformă*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1994, p. 41. For Iliescu's own account of his critical stances towards the Ceaușescu regime see pp. 41-43.

[2] Stelian TĂNASE, *Ora oficială de iarnă*, Institutul European, Iași, 1995, p. 143.

[3] See Dragoș PETRESCU, "The 1989 Revolutions in Hungary and Romania: Comparative Perspectives", in *Studia Politica. Romanian Political Science Review*, vol. 3, no.1, 2003, pp. 22-55.

[4] See the testimony of Alexandru Corneliu Cuțara in Marius MIOC, *Revoluția din Timișoara și falsificatorii istoriei*, Editura Sedona, Timișoara, 1999, p. 65.

[5] Quoted in *Timișoara: 16-22 Decembrie 1989*, Editura Facla, Timișoara, 1990, p. 85.

[6] Quoted in Miodrag MILIN, *Timișoara în revoluție și după*, Editura Marineasa, Timișoara, 1997, p. 29.

between the Timișoara protesters and the rest of the country[1]. The overwhelming majority of the Romanians, including the present author, who witnessed the 1989 Romanian Revolution in the city of Târgoviște, hundreds of kilometers away from Timișoara, heard about the revolt in Timișoara from the programs of RFE. Similarly, Liviu Antonesei, a critical intellectual from Iași, speaking of those days, confessed: "I shall never forget the almost non-stop programs of Radio Free Europe"[2]. Again, in those crucial days, it was the continuous flux of information broadcast by RFE that mobilized the population and kept alive the hope in the demise of Romanian communism[3].

When Ceaușescu ordered, somehow unexpectedly, for a mass meeting to be organized in Bucharest on 21 December, those forced to take part in the event knew perfectly well that by that time the city of Timișoara was effectively in the hands of the revolutionaries. During the Bucharest meeting the crowd started to shout due to a provocation from within and, a few minutes later, a panic-stricken crowd was trying to leave the place. Intended to support Ceaușescu's rule, the meeting turned into an anti-Ceaușescu demonstration. Gathered in the University Square in Bucharest, some demonstrators erected a barricade and continued their protest during the night of 21-22 December. In spite of the bloody repression, the next day, 22 December 1989, large crowds blocked the streets of Bucharest and occupied Party's Central Committee building, while other groups occupied the main building of the national television. On 22 December 1989 at 1208 hours, when Ceaușescu's helicopter left the upper platform of the Central Committee's building, the communist rule in Romania was over.

CONCLUSIONS

In the particular conditions of 1989 Romania, the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu wanted to obscure, for the overwhelming majority of the population, the meaning of what was happening in the rest of Sovietized Europe. Furthermore, the regime wanted people not to realize that the Soviet Union itself had changed dramatically, beginning in 1985, under Mikhail Gorbachev's leadership. As shown above, international media played an important role in identifying and, by means of sophisticated methods of mass communication, overemphasizing the structural flaws of the communist system. By doing this, it contributed to the shaping of the political cultures of resistance in communist countries, and speeded up the process that culminated with the final demise of communist regimes. This paper has demonstrated that, due to the specificity of the Romanian communism, i.e., the nature of the regime and community political cultures, international media had a strong impact on the collapse of communism in Romania and its role must not be neglected. International media, RFE most prominently, nurtured unrest in Romania by supporting

---

[1] *Ibidem*, p. 105.

[2] See Liviu Antonesei, *Jurnal din anii ciumei, 1987-1989: Încercări de sociologie spontană*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1995, p. 122.

[3] For a collection of telegrams, articles, and news of the international news agencies, newspapers and radio stations during the period 17-20 December 1989, see Miodrag MILIN (ed.), *Timișoara în arhivele "Europei Libere" – 17-20 Decembrie 1989*, Fundația Academia Civică, București, 1999.

the few radical dissidents in that country during the 1980s and by providing a continuous flow of information concerning the unfolding of events in East-Central Europe during the revolutionary year 1989.

At the same time, one should be aware of the fact that international media had a more limited impact on the collapse of other communist regimes in East-Central Europe. In Hungary, for instance, the 1956 revolution and its aftermath shaped both the regime and community political cultures, in the sense that the idea of avoiding at all costs another direct confrontation between the communist authorities and the population was profoundly internalized at both regime and community levels. Thus, international media had a limited impact on the final demise of communism in Hungary.